



Cocoon. Concentration



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Do you hear every small sound when you are trying to concentrate on a shot? Are you burdened with anxiety about where your ball will go every time you strike it? In an exclusive three-part *Asian Golf Monthly* series, **Jonathan Wallett**, Elite Performance coach of the Elite Coaching Golf Academy at the Evian Masters Training Centre in France, discusses the importance of good concentration in golf and reveals strategies designed to help you focus better. In the first of the trilogy, Wallett explains how you can learn to develop a Zen-like focus when you're on the course.

At a recent teaching conference of more than 1,000 golf coaches in America, the attendees were asked to write down what they considered to be the most important mental skills in golf. Over 90 per cent cited concentration and focus.

Jack Nicklaus, the best player in the history of the game with 18 professional Major championships to his name, would agree. He once said: "I was blessed with the ability to focus intensely on whatever I'm doing right now, free of distractions and to the exclusion of whatever else might pre-occupy me."

The obvious question, therefore, is why concentration and focus aren't taught more avidly in the golfing world?

Be truthful: How many lessons have you had in learning to develop your concentration? How much of your practice time do you spend on improving your focus? If you are like most players, the answer will be almost none.

So what exactly do we mean by the term concentration?

Concentration is simply the ability to devote one's undivided attention to something.

Concentration is not something that you can force. It 'flows', just like a river. Total concentration occurs when you become absolutely absorbed in the moment of what you are doing. You lose track of time, and everything seems effortless. Players describe it as a mystical state where everything feels effortless. Some refer to it as 'being in the zone'.

When you're on the golf course, it's the ide-



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al state, as a variety of Major champions can attest. Here are a couple of examples:

■ Swede **Helen Alfredsson** birdied the last two holes in regulation for a round of 63 to qualify for a play-off in the 2008 Evian Masters. She then birdied the first two extra holes to beat **Choi Na-yeon** and **Angela Park** and claim the title. "When you're really playing that well, you don't realise the score. You're in the golf shot, but the sense of past or failure doesn't exist. You're right here," she explained.

Greg Norman went to a similar place when he fired a closing 64 to win the 1993 British Open. In the wake of his victory he was quoted as saying: "I was hitting the ball perfectly with every swing. It was like someone had put the coin in the jukebox and the right song started playing."

Among an elite handful who are said to have been able to control the golf ball as if it were attached to a piece of string during the peak of their powers were **Ben Hogan**, **Nicklaus** and **Nick Faldo**.

Hogan is infamous and revered for his golf swing and the amazingly crisp, repeatable shots it produced. Among his peers, he was nicknamed 'The Hawk' because when he played golf he had the same transfixed stare of a hawk zoning in on its prey.

There is a story of him competing in a tournament and his playing partner made a hole-in-one. When marking the scorecard, he asked his fellow competitor what his score was on that hole! So absorbed was Hogan in his own cocoon of concentration he had not even noticed a hole-in-one.

Nicklaus joined the PGA Tour as a 22-year-old in 1962 and hunted down **Arnold Palmer** to win that year's US Open, his first Major. His long, straight and powerful hitting became a hallmark of his success. Indeed, such was the prowess of his long game that Nicklaus was able to scale the peaks with a short game regarded as ordinary by some observers.

Nicklaus was known as the 'Golden Bear', partly for his blond crop of hair, and partly for the relentless 'glare' he had in his eyes when competing.

It was not dissimilar with Faldo. So intense was he when he played that many of his rivals said 'it was like playing on your own when paired with Faldo'.



Key Points

- Concentration is simply the ability to place one's undivided attention on something;
- Everyone can improve their ability to concentrate. Work on it as you work on other areas of your game, like your swing or putting stroke.
- In the penultimate instalment of this three-part series in the September edition of Asian Golf Monthly, Jonathan Walllett discusses the 'Five Key Elements of the Zone'.

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When Faldo was at the top of his game in the early 1990s he was regarded as having as near a perfect swing as humanly possible. He was hailed as a 'golfing machine' for he was painstakingly meticulous in everything he did, from planning the shot through to execution. Rarely could anything distract him.

In golf there are literally dozens of players who possess great swings, yet can only be termed as 'good players'. With a good swing and great concentration you can become a great player. Those that happen to have been blessed with a great swing and great concentration are golfing icons such as Hogan, Nicklaus and Faldo.

A common denominator, or critical success factor, in all great performances is that the player at that time was totally focused and immersed in what he or she was doing. Great shots and great performances do not occur when you are distracted or engaged in heavy self-talk.

Who can forget the famous 'Duel in the Sun' in the 1997 British Open at Turnberry when Nicklaus, the world number one for the previous 15 years, was paired with the pretender to his throne, **Tom Watson**?

Watson had been widely touted as

the man to usurp Nicklaus at the pinnacle of the game. Problem was that the Golden Bear had no intention of stepping down from his lofty perch – at least not in the foreseeable future.

Paired together for the last two rounds, the duo became so immersed in their head-to-head contest at the top of the leaderboard that the other 80-odd competitors were forgotten. Great shot was matched with great shot and it was Watson who ultimately prevailed with two rounds of 65 compared to the 65, 66 by Nicklaus.

Both men relished the battle in which they were totally focused. Even though he had to settle for second place, to this day Nicklaus still describes it as one of his most memorable tournament experiences.

Can you learn to concentrate, or is it a God-given talent?

Just as a player can grow and develop his or her golf swing, so they can learn to improve and refine their ability to concentrate, and get 'in the zone'. Concentration is a skill, and like all skills can be learned and developed. Every player should pay respect to its importance, and look to

develop their ability to focus in tandem with the development of their golf game.

How is your concentration?

Think back to your best rounds and/or best tournaments. How was your concentration? What was your internal self-talk? How did you feel physiologically?

Now think back to a poor round and/or a poor tournament. How was your concentration? What was your internal self-talk? How did you feel physiologically?

It's well worth analysing the differences, no matter how subtle they might seem. After all, they could hold the key to future success.

As well as being well known for winning eight European Tour Order of Merit titles and performing brilliantly in the Ryder Cup, as player and captain, **Colin Montgomerie** is famous for being easily distracted by spectators, guilty of coughing, moving or taking a photograph at an inopportune moment.

Yet generally it's only when things are going badly that he's distracted. When he's playing his best, external distractions are not an issue.

Montgomerie could certainly have benefited from a better understanding and refining of his ability to stay on track when things were not going perfectly. Perhaps it could have helped him to secure that elusive Major victory that he so craved.

But how about you? Are you distracted by the smallest sound or movement? Are you distracted internally through negative thoughts or doubts? 'Don't hit it left OB', or:



“Those that happen to have been blessed with a great swing and great concentration have become golfing icons.”

'This is a fast putt, be careful not to three-putt'.

Here's a question for you. If you could learn to improve your concentration and focus by a minimum of 25 per cent, how would that affect your results or scores?

The point is that everyone can learn to manage distractions. Improving your concentration is a realistic and achievable aim for every

golfer. Concentration is one of the critical success factors which separate the good players from great players. Focus is a phenomenon, not just in golf but in other sports and, of course, life as well.

The ability to 'place one's undivided attention on something' is a prerequisite for any elite performance. Focus is the vehicle for excellence or outstanding performance.